

Worthington Essay Contest

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Class of 2024



News from the Texas Oilbirds

The Echo

October 2020 Edition

In a year that school administrators have fondly dubbed “unprecedented,” I am constantly reminded of our namesake, the oilbird. She courageously forages at night, supplementing her eyesight with echolocation. Just like this skilled creature, we, the Texas Oilbirds, find ourselves in the dark – needing to supplement our calendar with non-traditional activities that will both foster community and ensure safety. With this in mind, I am excited to devote the entirety of our monthly newsletter to the life-giving ingredient in any effective organization: community. This October edition of *The Echo* addresses building community in our organization in the midst of the current pandemic, including this year’s combination of online and in-person events.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY?

Community is the lifeblood of society. The Stanford Social Innovation Journal expounds that “the word itself connects us with each other. It describes an experience so common that we never really take time to explain it.”¹ Despite universally recognized value, the essence of community often seems ambiguous.

“It’s about people.”¹ Community describes the belonging and shared experiences between people. This means any organization where people frequently gather – including the Texas Oilbirds – can be the context of community. However, this camaraderie will not develop without proactively pursuing friendships: relationships that transcend simple name recognition and

¹ Chavis, David M, and Kien Lee. “What Is Community Anyway?” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 12 May 2015, ssir.org/articles/entry/what_is_community_anyway.

share interests and experiences. This leads to elective vulnerability – the true test of trust – which is the gateway to deep friendships. The following plan for our organization aims to develop just that: shared community through shared interests and experiences, guiding us forward together.

TEXAS OILBIRDS COMMUNITY GATHERING

A new Oilbirds community gathering replaces both our in-person monthly mixer and our monthly assembly. This twice monthly, hour-long, online meeting is strategic in specifically promoting Oilbird values to lay a foundation of common ground among our membership. This event also serves to educate and promote discussion in our community groups. While no virtual event ever truly recreates the human aspect of physical presence, certain activities help lower the disparity and nurture community:

Statement of Values

Hardened veteran or baby chick, we signed a statement of values to become a Texas Oilbird. The recitation of this creed at every meeting will reinforce Oilbird solidarity over shared principles of service. It provides an inclusive tradition and gives every Oilbird a greater purpose. The practice of verbally reaffirming values has a long historical track-record. Various governments and religions have successfully used this method to reinforce unity, from the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance to the Apostle's Creed.

Enriching Web Series

Since the virtual format does not lend itself easily to making spontaneous connections, we are repurposing what is normally a community meet-and-greet into an educational experience. This web-series focuses on illuminating and invigorating organizational values through numerous, diverse teaching formats including:

- (1) Guest Speakers
- (2) Virtual Mentoring and other service opportunities
- (3) Movie Nights
- (4) Game Nights (including prizes!)

(5) Student Forums

(6) Career Training

By having the main gathering of the Texas Oilbirds be principally informative rather than simply a “mixer,” Oilbirds will feel less pressure to force awkward social interactions. Don’t get me wrong, we want interaction to happen among Oilbirds, but the last few months of “Zoom University” have proved friendships are better fostered in other environments.

TEXAS OILBIRD COMMUNITY GROUPS

As mentioned previously, friendships are best cultivated in-person by those who make memories together. My experiences in the summer of 2019, as a high school study abroad student, helped cement this idea. On that trip, I was thrown into a new environment – new country and culture – with only a small group of strangers. We bonded over lunch excursions, challenging assignments, and other shared memories; strangers became companions. I hope to replicate this outcome among Oilbirds – especially freshmen. In a constantly evolving Covid-19 environment, I believe that the best way to form community is through largely in-person, memory-making adventures. This is accomplished safely through “community groups”:

Size

To comply with safety regulations, each group will have fewer than 10 members. This makes it possible for groups to participate in local excursions.

Composition

Although the Texas Oilbirds stand committed to facilitating civil discourse and providing exposure to different backgrounds and perspectives, we must balance these goals with the commonality that often forms comradery. Instead of choosing groups randomly, you will have a voice in your grouping:

(1) Each Oilbird will complete a short group assignment survey to indicate sorting criteria. Additionally, members may use this avenue to communicate interest in leadership positions.

(2) Oilbirds may also request to be placed with friends.

(3) Using this information, officers will assign groups based on member preferences.

This process will operate similarly to the systems many colleges use to match roommates. **Please look for your emailed survey next week.**

Leadership

Like the consuls during the Roman Republic, each community group will have two leaders who share the responsibility of organizing and advertising group events and reaching out to members. Additionally, this provides an important leadership opportunity for Oilbirds who are not officers. These positions are assigned based on interest expressed in the survey and a personal interview.

Oversight

To maintain accountability and insure groups promote Oilbird values, officers will evenly divide oversight of community groups and maintain consistent individual check-ins with group leaders. This arrangement also provides two additional benefits. First, members may use this avenue to register concerns about group leadership or safety. Second, it fosters communication between officers and newer members.

Format

Although in-person groups best stimulate community, many students feel unsafe gathering in small groups. As a result, community groups will have the option to meet completely virtually. You will choose your preference when you complete the sorting survey.

Function

In addition to the role of facilitating friendships, we strongly encourage community groups to complete certain activities:

(1) Groups will watch the bi-monthly Texas Oilbird Official Gathering together - either virtually or in-person. This arrangement will transform the Official Gathering from a watched ritual into an interactive learning experience. After each virtual Gathering, both virtual and in-person community groups can use the content to further discuss and connect, voicing likes and dislikes, applications, and takeaways from the content.

(2) Groups will complete a monthly “memory making” activity. This activity is up to the discretion of the group but must be approved by the overseeing Oilbird officer. Preferably this event will include a cultural, community service, or outdoor component.

Community groups are encouraged to meet outside official Oilbird events. I firmly believe that the more time groups spend together, the deeper their community will flourish.

Assessment

Although I have high expectations, I know that not every group is a perfect fit. After two months, we will re-assess the success of community groups through a quick survey and Officer feedback.

OTHER EVENTS

Many members have expressed concern over the fate of our Oilbird Career Fair and Oilbird Fall Picnic. The officers decided unanimously to reorganize the Oilbird Fall Picnic, complete with suggested festive activities, for individual Community Groups to schedule. This allows for safety as well as community. The Oilbird Career Fair will be hosted virtually at a date TBD.

CONCLUSION

Although this pandemic presents a myriad of challenges, I am thrilled to see how the Community Gathering and Community Groups – bread and butter of the Texas Oilbirds – foster community. You guys are some of the most friendly, capable, and resilient people at UT and I am honored to serve as your vice president.

I want to leave you with a note of encouragement: just like the oilbird navigates using echolocation to detect objects that elude her vision, **our community does not have to be *seen* to exist.** If you ever need to test your “echolocation,” I am here to help.

Your incoming vice president,

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